

# MARINE NOTES

SPOTLIGHT ON LANGUAGE

## Of Words and Water *Literature and the Bay*

BY JACK GREER

*“Wonder lies in the bay and  
its watershed in full measure.  
It is nothing alien or mystical,  
or reserved for the expert.”*

— Tom Horton  
Bay Country

For centuries the Chesapeake has inspired those who have settled on its shores. Native Americans of the Algonquian nation poetically called it “Chesepiooc,” meaning “Great Shellfish Bay” or, according to some, “Mother of Waters.” Early Spanish explorers named it “Madre de Dios,” the Bay of the Mother of God. Beginning in 1607, the establishment of large, English-speaking colonies brought a rich heritage of written language to the New World and to the Bay region, a tradition that continues to the present.

From the effusions of Captain John Smith to the gripping narrative of escaped slave Frederick Douglass to the contemporary ironies of John Barth and the lyrical descriptions of William Warner, the Chesapeake has inspired powerful writing in both fiction and nonfiction. Writers have drawn on the Bay for physical setting, dialogue and character, and in so doing have created a literature that deepens our understanding of cultures that have themselves been shaped by their relationship to this special place.

### The News Literature Brings

Literature is language that, as William Faulkner says, “lives.” It is news that stays news. But exactly what news does literature try to give us? How does it differ from other news — the news of science, for example, or the news of environmentalism or history?

To paraphrase the Roman poet Horace, “The purpose of literature is to delight and to teach.” It is not enough to “teach” (as would, say, history or science); or to “delight” (as would, say, some forms of popular culture) — literature does both at once. And, one might add, it must

*Please turn page*

## Literature, continued

accomplish this in a way that gives something back to our culture, something we would be poorer for not having. To say this in another way, a work of literature takes its substance and meaning from the culture from which it derives, but it also helps to shape our understanding, and our culture, in new and lasting ways.

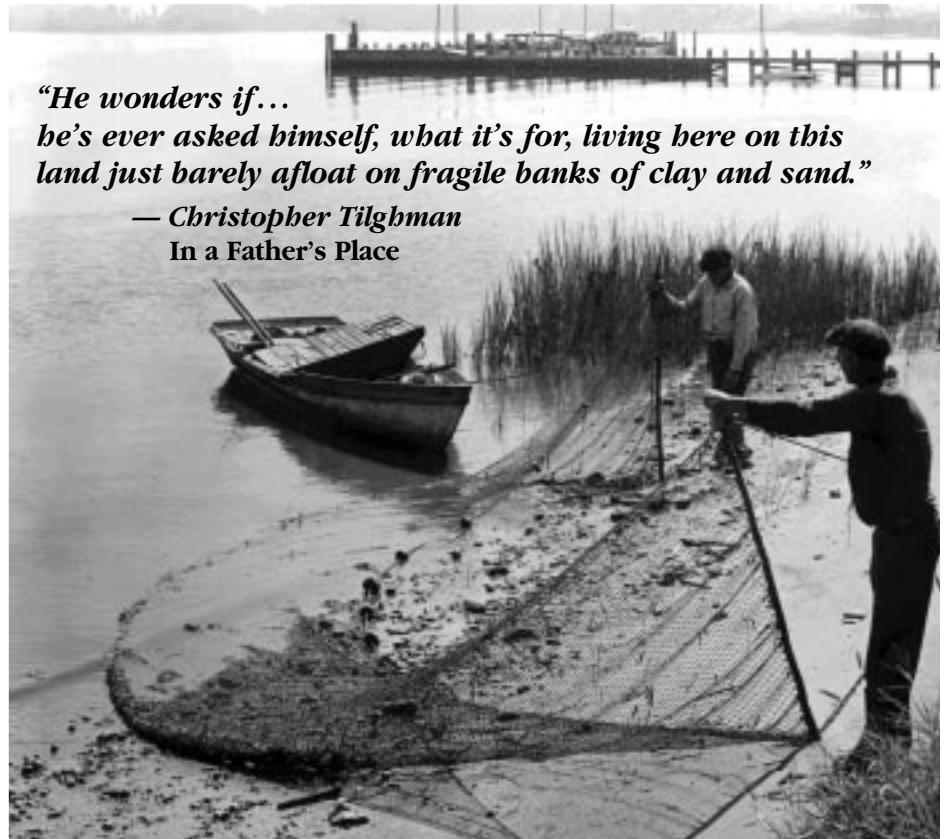
In his book *The Modes of Modern Writing*, novelist and literary critic David Lodge argues that literature involves the creative use of selection (of language) and combination (of language). Easy to say. Hard to do. Lodge posits that all writing, from encyclopedias to novels, involves this process of selection and combination, though he reserves the term “literature” for creative language (poetry, fiction, nonfiction) that employs linguistic devices to take the reader beyond the purely literal to more complicated mental capacities. In contrast to rhetorical argument, for example, which may aim to clarify through reduction, literature often aims to enlighten through amplification and evocation.

In literature, in the words of novelist Henry James, “There are depths.”

In what ways have Bay writings accommodated these richer, more complicated literary forms? Has the Chesapeake, among the shallowest of estuaries, inspired writers to give us the “depths” James refers to?

### The Bay As Setting

Of all the recent fictional works about the Bay, James Michener’s *Chesapeake* may well be the most widely read. Michener has done for the Bay what he has done for Hawaii, Texas and Alaska. He has taken on a place and described it in detail from its beginnings in geologic time through the course of natural and human history. The story of unfolding generations is set within that context — and Michener paints a vivid picture. If one wants to learn about the region, *Chesapeake* is a place to start. But the Jamesian depths are not here: Michener’s broad canvas dwells on society — it does not penetrate pri-



*“He wonders if...*

*he’s ever asked himself, what it’s for, living here on this land just barely afloat on fragile banks of clay and sand.”*

— Christopher Tilghman  
In a Father’s Place

vate psychologies, nor does it aim to. One might say that Michener’s approach, a very appealing one, is “top-down”: he begins with a framework of events and ideas and uses characters to bring them to life.

Other Bay writers compose their stories from the bottom up, starting with more realistic characters and settings — sometimes drawn from personal experience — and building the narrative on them. In such writings as *The Lord’s Oyster*, for example, Eastern Shore author Gilbert Byron relates stories steeped in firsthand experiences of growing up and living by the Bay. Here one can “see” the boats, the towns, the people of the Chesapeake as they once were, and many students of the Bay have, understandably, a strong affection for Byron’s intensely regional work. Byron’s writing has charm — though it does not create or evoke complex symbolic or archetypal design, nor does it reach deeper levels of psychological complexity.

One novelist who evokes the region by probing characters for whom the Chesapeake, as place, is integral

to the action, is J.R. Salamanca, author of several novels written during the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s. *Lilith*, though set in rural Maryland and not in a Bayside community, is perhaps Salamanca’s best known novel, popular enough to have been made into a feature film. In other novels, Salamanca focuses on the Chesapeake Bay — in *Embarkation*, for example, he dramatizes the life of a boat builder and his family in Solomons Island, Maryland. Unlike the novels of Michener or even Gilbert Byron, Salamanca tells his stories from the “inside,” through characters whose actions resonate with significance.

*Embarkation*’s boat builder, Joel Linthicum, is a husband and father who will stop at nothing to pursue his heart’s dream — building beautiful yachts — even if it means driving his family to ruin. Like a possessed artist, he cannot help himself. Salamanca evokes this “artist’s studio” when the son, returning home after many years because of the drowning death of his father, enters the Bayside boatyard:

I opened the door and went in and switched on the light and stood there once again embraced as if by my father's arms in the reek of clean redwood and pitch and hemp and oakum, shellac and creosote, the litter of sawdust and tendrils of shaved mahogany, tarry buckets and casting ladles and ladders and sawhorses and jumbled paint lockers and drill benches and lumber racks of fragrant teak and spruce and afrosia and white pine, and beyond, in the shadowy vault of the shop, tall and royal as a harp, the skeleton of a ship that he was building.

Salamanca seeks out and follows the lyrical structures of the language. Beyond this, he draws on the power of the Bay itself as symbolic force in the narrative. In a key description of a squall rising on the Bay, Salamanca joins a sailor's eye for nautical detail with the charged threat not only of the storm but of the father's obsession, which threatens to destroy the family. In a powerful turning point, one reckless moment places the builder's young son in the destructive path of a wildly spinning winch han-

dle. Here Nature shows a dark side; the descriptions of the Bay, of boat building, not only reveal a close connection with the real world, with a Chesapeake that we all recognize, but there is — as Joseph Conrad writes of literature — “something more.” That something more has to do with the human condition.

Sadly, *Embarkation*, and all of Salamanca's books, are out of print.

### Barth and the Bay

Perhaps no novelist has worked the Bay into fiction more inventively than the Cambridge, Maryland-born writer, John Barth. Barth began his literary career at the age of twenty-four, when he wrote *The Floating Opera* (1956), followed quickly by *The End of the Road* (1958). In 1960 he published *The Sot Weed Factor*, a rambling eighteenth century-style historical novel set in colonial Maryland that rivals Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* for expansive satire and libido.

But while books like *The Floating Opera* (and, much later, *Sabbatical* and *The Tidewater Tales*) draw on the Bay for their concrete moorings,

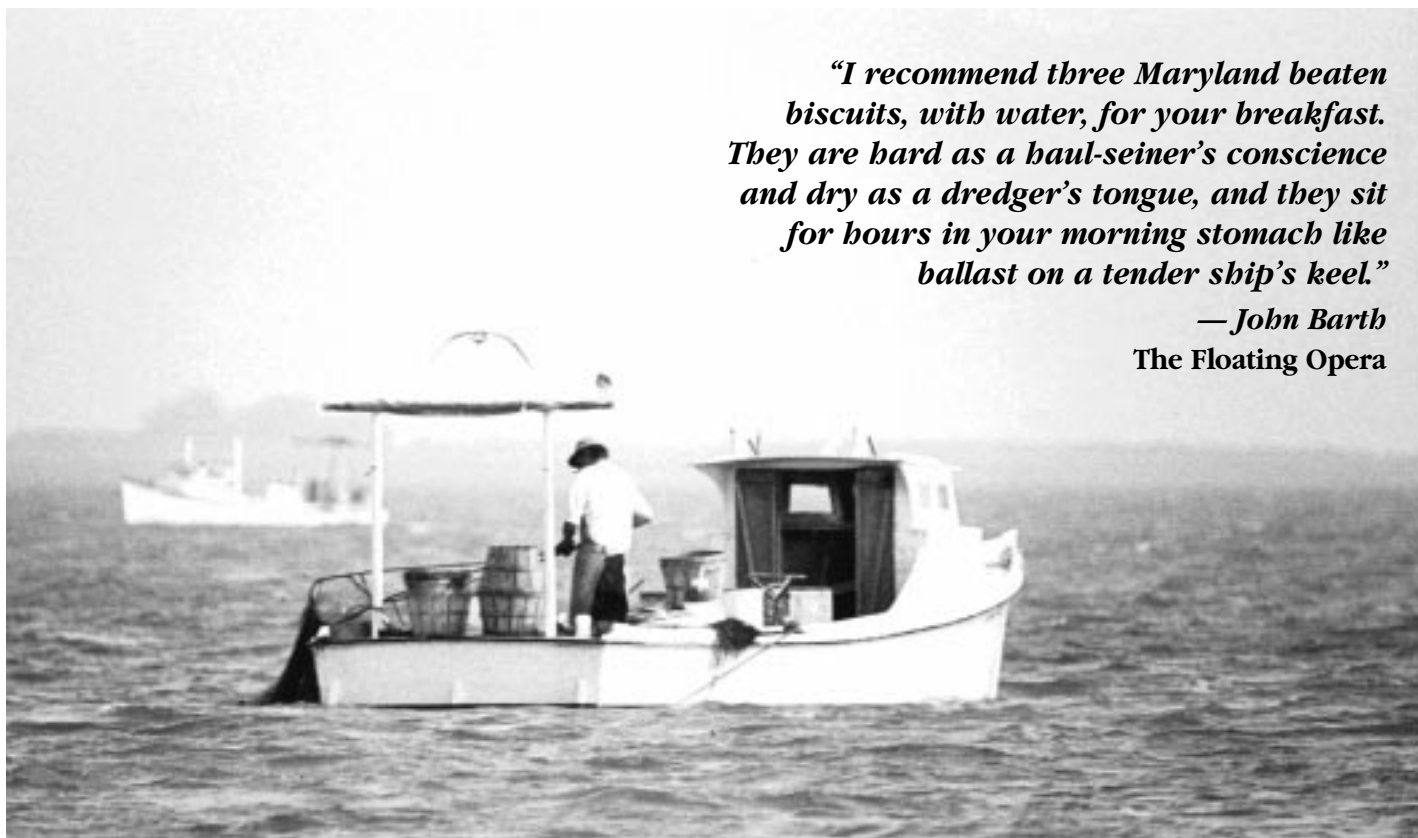
Barth's focus is not on the physical Bay, but rather on the process of fiction-making itself. In some ways like another Bay-area writer, Edgar Allan Poe, Barth sets his works in the landscape of the imagination, though we can easily recognize at the same time the marshy terrain of the Chesapeake. Unlike Poe, Barth is very conscious of his Chesapeake connections. In such essays as “Historical Fiction, Fictitious History, and Chesapeake Bay Blue Crabs, or About Aboutness” (in a collection entitled *The Friday Book*) and “Goose Art or, the Aesthetic Ecology of Chesapeake Bay” (in *Further Fridays*), Barth explores the relationship between “Bay” writing and “literary” writing (which must finally qualify as “art,” regardless of its subject).

Speaking of Bay literature in his essay “Goose Art,” Barth notes that while “a rising tide floats all boats,” it also floats all kinds of other stuff, including “garbage, untreated sewage and suchlike. . . .” He reminds us that the most important consideration for Bay literature, as for all literature, remains quality. And when it comes to quality Barth gives a critical nod to

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***“I recommend three Maryland beaten biscuits, with water, for your breakfast. They are hard as a haul-seiner's conscience and dry as a dredger's tongue, and they sit for hours in your morning stomach like ballast on a tender ship's keel.”***

**— John Barth  
The Floating Opera**



Skip Brown

## Literature, continued

one contemporary writer, Christopher Tilghman, who, like Barth, grew up on the Eastern Shore and learned to create fiction from its marshy setting and its murky past.

### You Can't Kill a Waterman

Tilghman is captivated by the Bay's complex history, and often writes about long-standing families that have struggled to keep their dignity (and their property) on the Eastern Shore. Such is the central story of his novel, *Mason's Retreat* (1996), set on the Chester River just before World War II. The main characters are American, but they have lived in England for a number of years and have returned to the aging "Retreat" only because the Depression has left them nearly penniless.

*Mason's Retreat* is not necessarily representative of Tilghman's best work. The stories of his collection *In a Father's Place* have a much finer edge — they give voice to his sense of the water and its influence on character. Consider this, from "Norfolk, 1969," a story about the painful and confusing 1960s: "What remained of [his wife] Julie, and Norfolk, and the sixties, was the sea, boundless and inexhaustible, the mystery and the source." Or this, from the title story, "In a Father's Place":

This was the soul of the Chesapeake country, never far from land on the water, the water always meeting the land, in flux. You could run from one to the other... until one morning he had awakened and listened to the songs from the water and realized that he was free.

While *In a Father's Place* contains pieces set in the American West, readers will find Maryland's Eastern Shore in several stories, including the opening one, "On the Rivershore." Here Tilghman describes how, inadvertently, a young boy witnesses the murder of a waterman in the tall reeds along the Chester River. The boy knows the waterman who has been shot dead, and he knows the

***"Enough superlatives. They mislead. The Chesapeake does not impress those who know it best as the grandest or most of anything. For all its size and gross statistics, it is an intimate place where land and water intertwine in infinite varieties of mood and pattern."***

— William Warner  
**Beautiful Swimmers**



Skip Brown

identity of the murderer — his father. Tilghman captures the Chesapeake setting, the watermen who come together ("ain't no one gonna kill a waterman") to confront the murderer, the psychological struggle of the small boy, and the waters of the Bay itself, as they finally close over the body.

In these stories Tilghman brings us closer to the heart of darkness, and of light, and closer to the mystery and the magic of the water.

### The Water's Magic

In the words of Tom Horton, the Chesapeake's waters are "ensorcelling." It is a great word, derived from "sorcery" — there is, quite simply, magic, as Horton says in *Bay Country*, "wherever land and water mingle seductively in the marshy skirts of the Atlantic coastal plain..."

The *Los Angeles Times* reviewer of *Bay Country* wrote of Horton that his is a "clean, sinewy prose that goes on holiday every few pages and cuts various beribboned capers. But in every

other respect, this Maryland journalist is a poet." Which brings to mind David Lodge's argument that "literature" is not limited to poetry and fiction, but that nonfiction can have evocative, even symbolic, power as well.

Horton's *Bay Country* is one such instance of that power. Another is William Warner's *Beautiful Swimmers*. Each takes the reader close to the heart of the Bay, its creatures and its water-men and water-women (not all of whom work the water). Horton's book won the John Burroughs Medal. Warner's won the Pulitzer Prize. Both books are compelling because they capture what so many who live in the region value in the dancing backwaters of countless rivers, coves and creeks. And then there is the "something more," the deep pleasure of lively prose.

While Warner and Horton focus on the Bay, they continue a branch of American writing that may have begun with Thoreau but which has evolved through such nature writers

as Aldo Leopold and Wallace Stegner. Horton, as a reporter, is also heir to those who, like Tom Wolfe, helped create New Journalism, where techniques of fiction and memoir are brought to bear on the reporting of factual information.

One might say, in fact, that two features rise from the Bay's literary landscape: the writings of naturalists and historians, including those who have lived and died by the Bay; and the works of novelists, poets and short story writers. To the first group belong Gilbert Klingel (*The Bay*), Anne Hughes Jander (*Crab's Hole: A Family Story of Tangier Island*) and others who have recorded first-hand Bay experiences. To the second group belong the literary virtuosos, such as Barth and Tilghman.

Interestingly, it is at the intersection of these two modes of writing — where naturalist nonfiction overlaps with more literary forms (forms that use dialogue and character, evoking a powerful sense of place) — that the Chesapeake may have its most distinct influence on language. In the writings of Warner and Horton the Bay inspires keen observation of ecology on the one hand and human nature on the other. By joining vivid depictions of those who live and work by the Bay — especially watermen but also others who belong to this region — with a deep appreciation of the estuary's natural wonder, these writers have increased our understanding not only of the Bay but of our culture and perhaps of literature itself.

There are, of course, many other Bay area writers who deserve mention — both writers of fiction like William Styron (Virginia) and Anne Tyler (Maryland), and of nonfiction, like Frederick Douglass — and, undoubtedly, we will soon hear from others. As the twentieth century draws to a close, Bay writers of both fiction and nonfiction are showing us how far we have come in valuing the ecological world that sustains us. When our descendants look back to trace this evolution in our thinking, the living details will be there for them to find in our literature. ♡

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Sandy Rodgers

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*NOTE: This list does not contain any children's, or special interest books (on history, lighthouses, duck hunting, skipjacks, etc.). For a more comprehensive list of these and other Bay publications, write to Tidewater Publishers, Cornell Maritime Press, P.O. Box 456, Centreville, Maryland 21617.*

# Literature and the Role of Words

BY JACK GREER

“The greatest enterprise of the human mind,” says E.O. Wilson, “has been and always will be the attempt to link the sciences and the humanities.”

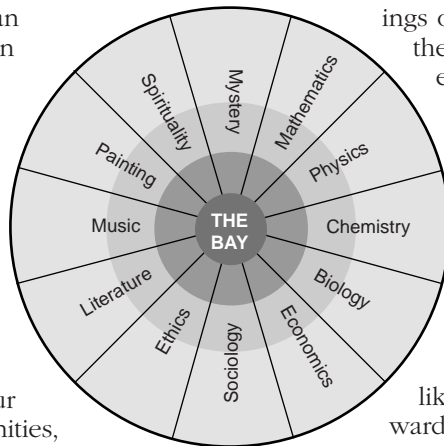
Wilson makes this statement in a new book entitled *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. He argues that most of the problems that face society — environmental problems, for example — lie at the bulls-eye of a matrix of disciplines. Radiating outward from its center are the biological sciences, the social sciences, environmental policy, ethics, while the problems themselves, the challenges to our national and international human communities, lie most often right at the center, where all disciplines converge.

“As we cross the circles inward toward the point at which the quadrants meet, we find ourselves in an increasingly unstable and disorienting region,” Wilson says. “The ring closest to the intersection, where most real-world problems exist, is the one in which fundamental analysis is most needed. Yet virtually no maps exist; few concepts and words serve to guide us.”

As Wilson points out, we need concepts, we need words. To achieve bridging concepts that can pass through rigid disciplinary boundaries, he suggests the concept of “consilience.” He borrows the word from William Whewell’s *The Philosophy of Inductive Sciences* (1840); it means, he says, literally a “jumping together” of knowledge. Wilson prefers the word to “coherence,” or other more common words, which are likely to suggest a wider variety of meanings.

In his matrix of knowledge, Wilson draws lines between “imagination” and the “real world” to emphasize the importance of their connection. Scientists have long acknowledged the role of imaginative thought in the scientific process — not only were specific inventions such as the submarine first dreamed up, long before they became a reality, by imaginative thinkers like Leonardo da Vinci and Jules Verne, but mathematicians and physicists have also attested to the value of free-wheeling, spontaneous breakthroughs from the less-than-fully-conscious mind. A famous example involves the mathematician Poincaré, who, upon stepping down from a bus suddenly visualized the solution to a difficult problem. He conceived of the solution not at his desk with pencil in hand, but while walking about, perhaps because of some unforeseen trigger in daily life. And one thinks, of course, of the apocryphal story of Newton and the apple.

Contemporary thinkers like James Hillman have written eloquently about the role of the imagination in the work-



**THE SYMBOLIC WHEEL.** All disciplines use symbolic constructs, whether words, mathematical formulas, or musical notation, to create meaning and relation to the concrete world, in this case the Chesapeake Bay.

ings of the healthy mind. Hillman describes the nonlinear ways that the human brain employs to “solve” problems, and points to the importance of myth not only to ancient peoples but to modern writers, philosophers and psychologists.

“Freud, it should be remembered, did not win the Nobel Prize for medicine, but rather the Goethe Prize for literature,” Hillman notes.

## Language and Water

When considering a body of water like the Chesapeake Bay, with an eye toward deep understanding, it becomes clear that more than one discipline pertains. Physical hydrology explains the Bay’s elaborate two-layer estuarine circulation pattern. Chemistry can explain how the Bay’s complex mixture of sodium interacts with a range of metals and with nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus.

Once we understand the physical and chemical substructure of the Bay, we can better explain its biology, first in terms of individual species, and then ultimately as an integrated, interdependent ecosystem.

But will those levels of understanding explain why, when standing at the end of a long low point of land, we stare at the red sunset with such interest and longing? Can physics explain our response to the deep purples and violets that dance across the surface of the waves? What explains not only the sizes and shapes of the waves themselves but the way we feel upon looking at them?

This is the task set before the writer, to bring all these facets of the mind to bear. Consider this excerpt from a recent article by Annie Dillard, author of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

“All my life, I have loved this sight: a standing wave in a boat’s wake, shaped like a thorn. I have seen it rise from many oceans, and I saw it rise from the Sea of Galilee. . . .

What I saw was the constant intersection of two wave systems. Lord Kelvin first described them. Transverse waves rise abaft the stern and stream away perpendicular to the boat’s direction of travel. Diverging waves course out in a V shape behind the boat. Where the waves converge, two lines of standing crests persist at an unchanging angle to the direction of the boat’s motion. We think of these as the boat’s wake. I was studying the highest standing wave, the one nearest the boat. It rose from the trough behind the stern and spilled foam. The curled wave crested over clear water and tumbled down. All its bubbles broke, thousands a second, unendingly. I could watch the present; I could see time and how it works” (“The Wreck of Time,” *Harpers’s Magazine*, January 1998).

# End Notes

Dillard's fascination with a boat's wake is hydrodynamic and physical, it is aesthetic ("shaped like a thorn"), it is spiritual. In fact by the end of the paragraph, when she states, "I could see time and how it works," we have linked the concrete physical with the metaphysical.

The joining of science and the humanities is, as philosopher Ernst Cassirer said, a joining of symbolic structures. Mathematics, physics, chemistry, poetry, music — all our separate disciplines are complex symbolic constructs, ways of trying to understand and manipulate the world, or to express it. The mathematician employs a numerical system; the composer uses musical notation. The chemist employs representative formulae; the poet uses phonemes built from a finite alphabet, what we call "words."

Cassirer describes these almost inconceivably complex symbolic constructs in his major work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Fortunately for the average reader, he explains the role of the humanities in a much shorter, more accessible book, *The Logic of the Humanities*.

Expanding on E.O. Wilson's diagram, and with Ernst Cassirer in mind, we could describe what could be called the "symbolic wheel" as we try to bring all our faculties to bear on a body of water like the Chesapeake Bay. At the center, as with Wilson's diagram, lies the "real world," in this case, the Bay, and radiating out from it are all our many disciplines — physics, chemistry, biology, economics, psychology, anthropology, literature, music, sculpture, myth, religion — and next to them, mystery, that part of understanding that will, as Albert Einstein once reminded us, always lie beyond our ken, no matter how much we learn.

The sciences and the humanities will always work in concert, and to understand the link will, as Wilson says, be the greatest enterprise of the human mind. Working side by side with scientists, those whose main tools are written words will help slowly push back the boundaries of human ignorance — as E.M. Foster said of Virginia Woolf, they will struggle to bring light a little further into the darkness. ✓

## Publications

■ **Striped Bass Research.** On June 6 and 7 the University of Maryland Agricultural Experiment Station and Maryland Sea Grant co-hosted — together with the Striped Bass Growers Association, the Maryland Aquaculture Association and the Northeastern Regional Aquaculture Center — a two-day national conference on the current research and production activities associated with striped bass and its hybrids.

More than 120 people registered for the conference that included presentations on research activities by some of the best striped bass and hybrid researchers from around the country in such disciplines as genetics, growth, reproduction, nutrition, production, and disease.

A 36-page collection of presentation summaries titled *Striper 2000: Striped Bass and Its Hybrids — A Program Summary* was produced for the conference. To obtain a copy of the booklet, contact Maryland Sea Grant, by phone (301) 405-6376, or e-mail, [connors@umbi.umd.edu](mailto:connors@umbi.umd.edu).

## Call for Papers



■ **Rethinking Tourism, April 25-29, 1999.** The World Congress on Coastal and Marine Tourism, to be held April 25-29, 1999 in Vancouver, British Columbia, will focus on "Rethinking Tourism: Choices, Responsibilities and Practices." The intent of the meeting will be to facilitate constructive dialog on a variety of topics related to tourism, society and the environment.

Congress organizers are currently seeking abstracts for papers to be delivered at the conference. For details on topics and submission of abstracts, contact Jan Auyong at Oregon Sea Grant by phone (541) 737-5130, fax (541) 737-2392 or e-mail, [auyongj@ccmail.orst.edu](mailto:auyongj@ccmail.orst.edu).

## Sea Nettle Stings



### ■ Reader Says Papaya Remedy Works Best.

After seeing an article on jellyfish, or sea nettles, in a back issue of

*Marine Notes* on the web (<http://www.mdsg.umd.edu/MDSG/Communications/MarineNotes/Jul-Aug94/index.html>), one of our readers e-mailed us a suggestion for treating their stings. Roger Jackson of Scotland, Maryland, an avid wind surfer in the nettle-filled Chesapeake Bay and the waters off North Carolina's barrier islands, discovered a new remedy he swears by.

He was using meat tenderizer to relieve the pain and swelling of nettle stings, when he noticed that papain was listed as the active ingredient. He decided to see if he could locate the substance. Defined in the dictionary as "an enzyme capable of digesting protein, obtained from the unripe fruit of the papaya," papain was available in health food stores in green papaya powder. He found that, when mixed into a paste with water, the powder worked much better than the meat tenderizer, eliminating the irritation caused by the sting within minutes.

After finding fresh papaya at the supermarket, he decided to see if it was also effective. He carried one to the beach with him and the next time he got stung, cut off a slice of papaya and applied it to the injury — he says that it relieved the pain instantly. "When smushed into a paste and applied to the affected skin area, fresh papaya provides the most dramatic 'cure' I've witnessed," says Jackson. "Even more dramatic is the rapid disappearance of any welts associated with sea nettle exposure." He has since used the papaya cure himself and shared it with others suffering from run-ins with nettles.

We've added Mr. Jackson's papaya treatment to our jellyfish article on the web and we welcome comments on his or any other remedies.

## Calendar

### October 28-30 — Ocean Discovery Symposium



Washington, DC. A symposium on Fifty Years of Ocean Discovery, sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences. Topics will include achievements in biological, chemical and physical oceanography, marine geology and geophysics, and deep-sea exploration with the ALVIN submarine. Among the speakers will be Rita Colwell, the new director of NSF.

Registration costs \$75 (\$25 for students). For more information, contact Ann Carlisle or Ed Urban at the Ocean Studies Board, (202) 334-2714, acarlis1@nas.edu, or check the web at <http://www2.nas.edu/osb/2326.html>.

### November 18-22 — Shellfish Restoration

Hilton Head, South Carolina. The Second International Conference on Shellfish Restoration will provide an opportunity for participants to discuss approaches for restoring coastal ecosystems through habitat quality assessment and restoration; stock enhancement, management and restoration; and habitat remediation through watershed management. The conference will include a session organized by the Oyster Disease Research Program.

For registration information, contact Elaine Knight by e-mail, [knightel@musc.edu](mailto:knightel@musc.edu); voice mail, (843) 727-2078; or fax, (843) 727-2080. Up-to-date information on the conference is available on the web at <http://www.noaa.gov/SCSeaGrant/text/ICSR.html>.

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